

JUST BEFORE DAWN

LOUISE MOREY BOWMAN

Life is a queer thing. . . like a keen white flame
Blood-tipped. . . that eats its way into the heart
Till, for one blinding instant. . . one sees clear.
What luck to have you here to help me die!
Dick. . . here at the last it's not the woman you know
And think of. . . naturally. . . that's with me now.
Not my calm, practical, and splendid wife,
With beauty, fortune, and fine ancestry,
Her healthy babies and her charities.
It certainly seemed the wisest thing on earth
To marry her. My uncle often said
"She'll make a man of you!" Perhaps she did. .
But you note my phrase. . . the wisest thing. . . *on earth*.
Suppose that suddenly one has a chance
To step into heaven for an instant and, poised there,
To choose for heaven. . . *and earth*. . . and fails? What then?
Yes. . . Primitive orthodoxy that you'll say!

Sheila I met in those years in New York
In that research work. She. . . so tiny, frail,
Yet so indomitable. . . was working there
With. . . . you know. Yes, chosen and trained by him
From many applicants. To see her there,
Among his bottled horrors, was a sight
To freeze the blood and then to make it surge
With pity and passion. . . in my case with doubt.
My poor blood! Poisoned with doubts! But it's purged now
Of doubt and greed. . . of everything but love. .
Just love for Sheila. . . thing of fire and snow
I might have won had I not been. . . a slave?. .
A wise man or a fool? Who dare say which?

She was a foundling, wrapped in mystery,
 Adopted, then, by a queer turn of fate
 Flung out. . . college-trained, to face the world alone.
 She trusted like a child, yet she's a sword. . .
 A flashing rapier of Irish wit,
 Sharpened on her white innocent purity,
 That made men wince if they but felt its prick.
 Sheila and I were friends from the day we met.
 O man. . . those evenings at the hospital. . .
 So very few, but I gained one now and then. . .
 Though only once or twice we were alone.
 Pathetic place for her to entertain
 Her friends, but better than her boarding house,
 And. . . . arranged it, for a few of us.
 The lift would take us up, up. . . then we'd climb
 The last short flight and find her waiting there. . . .
 In her white tower as we called it; far below
 The city's turmoil and the blazing lights;
 Outside the windows the great starry sky.
 Perhaps the moon would flood the place with light
 That turned its bare, glass-filled utility
 By magic into shimmering loveliness.
 And bless me I vow we've seen fairy folk. . .
 Her "little People". . . racing up and down
 Over the glass shelves in the moonlight there,
 As she recited Irish poems and plays.

Of course you know the way I was brought up
 By my old uncle. . . the most rational,
 Material old cynic ever breathed;
 And the three-quarters of me not my own
 But his and my father's. . . leaped to his lessons well.
 The other fraction. . . caught from God knows where. . .
 Unless my mother cradled in her heart,
 Unknown to them, a tiny sparkling dream. . . .
 That other fraction Sheila found at last.
 Strange, lovely child! Clever as she could be!

Those skilful hands! Those great grey eyes that saw
A gleaming beauty even in sordid things.
How can I make you see her as she was?
All poetry and every fairy faith,
And every leaping flame and fall of dew,
That only a faun, goddess, or child could know;
Packed in a form made up of ivory,
And blossoms and fire, and set to face the world
In hospital laboratory above New York!
Her bread earned analysing human germs. . .
The hideous concrete enemies of life.
And all the while so very very frail.
I knew she could not stand that life for long.
Or any life, for that matter. It just meant
A few years anyhow. But oh those years!
I might have had them!—Well, my uncle died,
You knew about his piteous tragic end.
He begged me to marry Laura. So there came
My choosing battle. . . and I killed my dreams.
Such battle!. . . When the soul of me cried out
For Sheila, and my brain and body called
To things of earth. . . to Laura, calm, rich, strong.
No. . . I must tell you all now to the end.
I've never talked before. . . but I must now. . .
And it's easier to you than. . . to God alone.

Sheila worked on for three years. . . laughing still. . .
Sometimes I hear that lovely brook-like laugh. . .
You've never really known me, have you, Dick?
But Laura's known me far far less than you.
I met a man of that old New York crowd
In a café in Paris a year ago.
He told me Sheila lived to the very last
"Laughing and dreaming just the same" he said
"In Adirondack sanitariums."
He asked her to marry him, but she said No.
She told him "I loved a man who was too wise,

Too rational, cold, strong to marry me. . .
 Yet we belong to each other. I'll just wait."
 He told me her very words, and never knew
 The man sat there beside him.
 So she died.
 In sanitarium cabin on the edge
 Of a great pine wood.
 Waiting there at dawn.

Thank you for listening all this time, old friend.
 Death. . august, royal Death. . . breaks barriers down.
 Can you still hear when my voice is so gone?

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They published just one little slender book
 Of her poems. Critics say they're very fine.

I have it with me now. . . . upon my heart. . . .
 So worn. . . you'll see they don't take it. . . away?
 The fragment of herself she left to earth!
 Is this the end of Sheila. . . and of me?

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I'm climbing up those last stairs. . . in the dark. . .
 To her white tower. . . Sheila's. . . what strange blue dusk. .
 The stairs. . never used to be. . . so long. . . so steep. .
 What strange. . blue. . dusk. . .
 Is it moonlight?. . . .
 Sheila!
 Dawn!